

# HOW DO INTEREST GROUPS LEGITIMATE THEIR POLICY ADVOCACY? RECONSIDERING LINKAGE AND INTERNAL DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF DIGITAL DISRUPTION

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## **Abstract**

The ongoing embrace of interest groups as agents capable of addressing democratic deficits in governing institutions is in large part because they are assumed to contribute democratic legitimacy to policy processes. Nonetheless, they face the challenge of legitimating their policy advocacy in democratic terms, clarifying what makes them legitimate partners in governance. In this paper we suggest that digital innovations have disrupted the established mechanisms of legitimation. While the impact of this disruption is most easily demonstrated in the rise of a small number of ‘digital natives’, we argue that the most substantive impact has been on more conventional groups, which typically follow legitimation logics of either representation or solidarity. While several legacy groups are experimenting with new legitimation approaches, the opportunities provided by technology seem to offer more organizational benefits to groups employing the logic of solidarity, and appear less compatible with the more traditional logic of representation.

# **HOW DO INTEREST GROUPS LEGITIMATE THEIR POLICY ADVOCACY? RECONSIDERING LINKAGE AND INTERNAL DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF DIGITAL DISRUPTION**

## **INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL DISRUPTION, POLICY ADVOCACY AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMATION**

Discussions of digital disruption are ubiquitous. In the context of markets for goods and services as diverse as taxis, accommodation and holiday bookings, to name but a few, there is clear evidence of the disruption to ‘legacy’ industries enabled by digital technologies. Firms like AirBnB, Tripadvisor and Uber have affected substantial disruption to existing business models in these industries. In this paper we consider the disruptive impact of digital technologies on the organization and practices of interest groups. One can imagine a range of ways in which the impact of digital innovations might be felt. Fung *et al.* (2013) examine six such impacts, including the way digital technologies help citizens to engage directly with political elites or the ways that they enable interest groups to shape public opinion and mobilize their constituents. Recent scholarly work has provided ample examination of the utilization of social media and ICTs by interest groups to communicate with diverse audiences, such as politicians, members and other groups (Brown 2016; Chalmers and Shotton 2015; Van Der Graaf *et al.* 2016). Other work has outlined how groups utilize such technology to pursue existing organizational imperatives and tasks they have long engaged in (Halpin 2014; Karpf 2012). Yet, the role of digital technology in re-shaping the existing *logics* by which groups *legitimate their policy advocacy* has to our knowledge not been actively considered.

This is a crucial question for scholars of public administration and governance. Much recent research related to bureaucratic politics and policy advisory systems (Braun

2013; Craft and Wilder, 2017), as well as work on network governance and collaborative public management (Chapman and Lowndes 2014; Daugbjerg and Fawcett 2015; Kim and Darnall, 2016; Lang, 2016; O’Leary et al. 2006), has emphasized the increasingly important role of a variety of external actors and organizations in policy processes; yet also underlined the difficulties policymakers face when seeking to engage these stakeholders. The involvement of these non-state actors, such as citizens and interest groups, can play an important role in addressing key challenges of contemporary governance, such as legitimacy, justice and effective administration (Fung, 2006). Here we focus on the first challenge, namely legitimacy, and the policy engagement of one particular type of stakeholders, namely interest groups. Public institutions engage with groups in order to address concerns over democratic legitimacy – what is commonly referred to as ‘input legitimacy’ – and groups often make claims to be legitimate on the basis that they represent important views, constituencies or interests. It is our contention that digital innovations have rendered assessing the democratic credentials of groups more complex, but no less important.

Due to constraints in time and resources, policymakers cannot possibly speak to every group vying for their attention. Hence, they need to figure out which group most closely approximates the targeted constituency and provides the most accurate representation of the interests and preferences of this particular segment of society. In other words, policy makers must routinely evaluate the claims of groups, not only in terms of the quality of the expertise they provide but also in democratic terms. In the latter respect, policy makers must interpret claims to democratic legitimacy. In whose name are these groups claiming to speak, and which mechanisms and processes do they have in place to ensure that they accurately reflect the opinions and preferences of their constituency? As noted by Chapman and Lowndes ‘non-elected representatives are asked

all the time: “who do you represent, and how do you know you are representing them?” (2014, p. 288).

Thus, developing heuristics that assist in calibrating the democratic potential of groups against existing practices is highly salient to the study of public administration and policy making. More precisely, we focus on two typical ways in which interest groups signal to policymakers through their organizational practices that they are legitimate participants in policy processes, and examine how technological advances are reshaping these practices. As regards these established legitimation logics, we draw on a distinction between groups engaging in representation and solidarity (Halpin 2006). Our central argument is that digital technologies have challenged, and in some cases disrupted, how groups are implementing these logics. We focus our discussion and analysis on two dimensions that were highlighted in previous work and that we consider critical for assessing how groups legitimate their advocacy work: (i) the nature of the linkage between a group and its constituency, and (ii) the nature of internal democracy.

We show that a handful of groups at the national and international level that might be considered ‘digital natives’ – for instance, MoveOn, 38Degrees or Avaaz – have fully utilized such disruptions. But our main focus is on the impact on the majority of legacy groups, who often add these innovations to their existing practices, using them to connect with a broader audience (as they seek to maximize their attentive public) and to facilitate the formation of issue communities within their membership. We argue that attention to how these organizations embrace digital innovation is vitally important, as they have long played a key role in ensuring civic stability and engagement, and frequently participate in policy processes (Skocpol 2003; Wells 2014). We find that groups who deploy a solidarity inspired logic find capitalizing upon these technologies helpful – as they are well aligned with existing practices of linkage and internal democracy and thus render them more

efficient – while those pursuing a representational logic face challenges in embracing the new technological opportunities because doing so appears to weaken the foundations of that logic.

## **REVISITING THE ROLE OF GROUPS AS DEMOCRATIZING AGENTS: GENERATING LEGITIMACY**

Interest groups have long featured in accounts of the democratic infrastructure of contemporary western political systems (see for instance Key 1942, Schattschneider 1948; for a recent discussion see Hacker and Pierson 2014). Classic discussions of political responsiveness, especially in majoritarian systems, pencil in important roles for groups in ensuring that minority views are voiced adequately. In all systems, the long periods between elections suggest the salience of group engagement in public policy as a critical feedback loop (Cobb and Elder 1971). More generally, Fung argues that 'for emergent issues that arise between elections or for issues that cut across the platforms and ideologies of parties and candidates, elected officials and public administrators may be unable to gauge public opinion and will' (2006, p. 70). The apparent decline of political parties in relation to membership has led many to explore the potential of groups as compensatory linkage between state and civil society (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Cain *et al.* 2003; Dalton 2004). This type of scholarly analysis is supported by the actions of national and supranational public governing institutions, which explicitly set out to engage with organized interests on the basis that they can assist in legitimating their actions (e.g. Hanegraaff *et al.* 2011; Kohler-Koch and Finke 2007; Saurugger 2008).

The interaction between interest groups and policymakers, which can take place in institutionalized settings such as advisory councils and parliamentary committees, yet also relates to informal meetings in which policy matters are being discussed, is often

conceptualized as a process of exchange (Hall and Deardorf 2006). Here, groups provide certain ‘policy goods’, such as policy expertise or legitimacy, in return for being granted access by public officials. In what follows, we focus our attention on the capacity of groups to legitimate certain policy choices. We argue that interest groups are uniquely qualified to provide this particular policy good. Compared to other possible stakeholder, such as corporations, public institutions or think tanks, interest groups by definition aim to advocate for a particular constituency; they are intermediary organizations that are set up to function as a bridge between a usually well-defined societal groups and public authorities (see Salisbury 1984).

All interest groups thus make the claim (implicitly or explicitly) that they speak ‘in the name of’ a certain constituency, be it a profession, an industry or people who support an ideological viewpoint or a certain cause. As demonstrated by Braun, rather than the quality of their policy expertise, a key reason why bureaucrats engage with certain groups is that they are considered ‘too important a spokesperson to neglect’ (2013, p. 818). Likewise Grossman notes that groups are often asked to testify in parliamentary hearings because congressional staff believe they ‘have credibility’ and ‘represent a constituency’ (Grossman 2012, p. 155). Yet, a certain constituency is often given a voice by multiple organized interests. However, the way in which they define membership and involve members in their activities often differs considerably. As we will clarify below, not only do groups apply distinct legitimation logics, new communication technologies have also opened up new ways of legitimizing policy work, which have been adopted by a new generation of digitally savvy interest groups, yet also by more traditional groups.

The concept of legitimacy is notoriously hard to define, but here we use it to refer to whether a claim by an organisation is considered justified and proper by policy makers and political institutions (see discussion in Collingwood and Logister 2005, 178) More

specifically, Halpin (2006) argued that there are two broad approaches to calibrating the democratic potential and practices of groups. Each approaches the normative question of how claims to legitimacy can be assessed in a different manner. The first, which accords with the implicit assumption operating in much discussion of groups and democracy, is the logic of representation. The second, which has been less evident, is that of solidarity. When is a logic of representation necessary versus a logic of solidarity? There is a normative dimension to this framework. Where a constituency has the potential to be present and have its own voice, then that constituency can authorize their advocates and hold them to account (Pitken 1964; O'Neill 2001). Where a constituency can do so, then the group advocating for them ought to offer sufficient conditions for such authorisation and accountability to be exercised. That is, a group advocating for such a constituency ought to practice representation. By contrast, where a constituency cannot be present or have its own voice (we think here of future generations, nature, and so on), then there is no capacity for it to hold advocates to account or to authorize them. In this situation, a group advocating for such a constituency does not need not to legitimate advocacy through practices close to the logic of representation, but instead relies on practices related to the logic of solidarity.

## **HOW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES HAVE DISRUPTED LOGICS OF DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY: LINKAGE AND INTERNAL DEMOCRACY**

There has already been discussion of the ways in which digital technologies may have changed the way advocacy is legitimated. Influential scholars have suggested that digital technologies have fostered a post-representational based politics (Bennet and Segerberg 2013; Tormey 2015). Others concentrate on the impact of technology in fostering new ways of doing longstanding group functions (Chadwick 2007; Karpf 2012 and 2016). In this section, we build upon these insights and offer an analysis that specifically focuses on

the ways in which digital technologies have disrupted how groups legitimate their policy advocacy. In doing this, we focus on two central dimensions: the type of linkage between a group and its constituency, and the nature of internal democracy.

In what follows, we first clarify the key disruptions of these dimensions by digital technology, which are most visible in the practices of a small number of groups who can be considered ‘digital natives’. As is well documented, a relatively small number of groups for whom the digital innovations of the 1990s created critical affordances, have embraced this type of approach. We think here of high profile organizations such as *MoveOn* (US), *GetUp!* (Australia) or *38Degrees* (UK): all of which have been well studied in their own right (Karpf 2012; Chadwick and Dennis 2017; Vromen 2016). Some have argued that these groups ‘cannot function without the complex spatial and temporal reconfiguring of political life that has been enabled by the widespread adoption and organisational embedding of digital communication’ (Chadwick and Dennis 2017, p. 45).

Our main focus here, however, involves addressing a key aspect of this discussion that has received little scholarly attention so far: namely, how these new digital opportunities have affected the legitimization practices of existing groups that typically either follow a logic of representation or a logic of solidarity. Therefore, we provide a discussion of the more numerous cases whereby legacy groups seek to combine existing solidarity or representational logics with the ‘new’ practices enabled by the affordances of digital technology. This ‘synthetic’ strategy, as we will discover, offers many advantages, but also fundamentally challenges the ways in which these groups traditionally legitimated their advocacy work. In particular, these challenges appear most outspoken for groups that operate on a logic of representation, while they provide greater organizing benefits for groups that apply a solidary-based approach to legitimization.



## Digital Technologies and Linkage: Maximizing the (Potential) Engagement of the Attentive Public

At a minimum, groups need to decide whom they seek to advocate for, and who will qualify as members. A logic of representation implies a closed membership base. A farmers' union, for example, can claim to represent the views of farmers because they embody its membership (see Dunleavy 1991 for discussion of 'exogenous groups'). These 'groups of' are often strongly linked to economic or professional identities, as members of the group typically belong to a similar industry or profession. Some groups, by contrast, pursue the interests of a third-party constituency. Environmental and civil liberties groups are classic examples of organizations that often apply a solidarity logic, which implies an open membership. Typically, this means an appeal to what social movement scholars term a group's '*attentive public*' (Lowe and Gyder 1983; Robinson 1992, p. 36). This term refers to that portion of the broader general public that shares the group's issue perspective or values. The logic of solidarity implies a group is open to anyone who shares the values or issue position that they advocate for. Put simply, one does not need to be a member of the WWF or another environmental group to be considered an environmentalist. Groups that apply the logic of representation generally seek to build *membership density*; they aim to represent as high a proportion of the constituency in whose name they advocate politically. Of course, most groups employing a solidarity model will not be successful in making members out of much of their attentive public. Instead, they make members out of what we call their *committed public* – that section of the attentive public who formally commits to the group's objectives via provision of membership fees or (more often) donations.

Digital technologies have encouraged some groups to conceive those affiliating with a group not as members or supporters, but instead as 'subscribers' (Chadwick 2013, p. 190). This term makes sense because simply adding oneself to a 'list', most often an

email list, renders one a group affiliate. It is a low-threshold test for affiliation, which also means that the constituency such groups seek to advocate for are in fact very close to their complete *attentive* public. So, for example, we see that when someone wants to join a group, like GetUp! (Australia), one simply enters their email address into the website, and is added to the list. No fee is required, and no subsequent action is necessary. Here, signing up – registering your email – counts as membership, and is assumed to mean tacit support for the groups broad mission. With a subscriber base of just over 1 million Australians, the group has undoubtedly tapped a large segment of its attentive public, i.e. those with broadly progressive values. Nevertheless, the constituency base for such groups is hard to fully conceptualize, as they draw upon a diverse crowd. As observed by Chadwick referring to the case of MoveOn in the United States, ‘although it obviously draws most of its support from progressive activists, it represents no single, easily identifiable sectional interest or discrete social constituency (2007, p. 296).’

While groups employing a solidarity logic might not expect all those empathetic towards the constituency the group seeks to advocate for will actually *support* them, nor will groups utilising a representational logic expect that all their (potential) constituency *join* them as members, these digital natives could reasonably expect most of those who identify with the broad ethos of a group (e.g. they are progressive or conservative, nature lovers, or peace activists) to subscribe. The act of subscription should not be construed as seeking ‘representation’ of some well-established constituency (i.e. farmers or older persons), or as showing ‘solidarity’ with some other set of interests, but rather entry to a *community* within which one can co-create constituencies, interests and advocacy.

While the entry into this online community is very low and actual participation is not required, this does not necessarily imply that these online advocacy groups are less committed to, or successful in, involving citizens in their activities and policy work. This

is an empirical question, adjudication on which requires systematic analysis of the relationship between group form and member/supporter involvement (see Bimber et al. 2012). While no more than an email address is required to join these groups and to become a member, in many cases there are ample opportunities for these ‘subscribers’ to participate and contribute to activities (both online and offline, as we will clarify below). That is, while the organizational set up and the processes of linkage and agenda setting applied by these digital natives are of a different nature, these groups do not appear by definition to offer *fewer* opportunities for citizen engagement compared to more conventional groups that operate on a logic of representation or solidarity.

### **Digital Technologies and Internal Democracy: Issue Communities**

If digital technology has opened up new ways of conceptualising a group’s constituency and the way they are affiliated, then it has delivered similar effects on existing conceptions of internal democracy and how groups decide on their policy agenda. A representational logic implies that a group enfranchises its members in the process of deciding what their policy positions should be. It is a *bottom-up* form of agenda setting. There is a clearly identifiable constituency, and groups generally offer channels that enable members to indicate their concerns and preferences to group leaders. As such, groups deploying this logic often emphasize their ‘representative’ nature and the fact that they are the authoritative voice of a particular constituency; it is considered a core part of their identity (Heaney 2004).

By contrast, because groups deploying a solidarity-based logic affiliate committed publics who are not in a (privileged) position to define the interests their groups pursue, they often do not create elaborate structures to enfranchise members. Such groups encourage ‘a form of participation that is essentially financial (sustaining professionalized

roles by organizational staff), and passive in terms of individualized action' (Jordan 2009, p. 97; see also Jordan and Maloney 1997). For those groups implementing a solidarity-based logic, the task is to sell the issue they focus on to the attentive public in return for their support: those who decide to join in turn become part of the committed public (Walker 1983 and 1991; Nownes and Cigler 1995).

The affordances of digital technology lower the cost and raise the immediacy of acts of participation by individuals in advocacy groups, which in turn (re)structures the ways in which internal democracy operates. As individuals are affiliated to the group as 'subscribers', not members, they then form temporary constituencies from which advocacy is authorized and to which groups account for their advocacy actions. To provide an illustration of this approach, in its pitch to new subscribers on its website, GetUp! explains 'You choose the issues you want to work on. We provide the strategy and opportunities to make the biggest impact'. Those who sign-up to GetUp! do not automatically commit to a pre-determined policy agenda or 'framing' of an issue, but rather contribute to the chosen policy focus and/or framing as a member. Similar practices are discussed in recent detailed studies of 38 Degrees, where it is noted that these online repertoires 'foster individual autonomy and self-expression among its members' as 'members choose the campaigns they wish to promote and support' (Chadwick and Dennis 2017, p. 56). By contrast, the policy position of a group with a solidarity-based logic like Animals Australia is well established, and thus members sign up to this position when they decide to join the organization (see below for a more detailed discussion).

On this score, the increasing use of internally generated digital analytics, it is argued, provides one mechanism for subscribers to authorize advocacy *in their name*. Recent work focussing on digital natives argues that data analytics can be used as a form of 'internal listening' whereby leaders 'test' messages or potential issue campaigns with

subscribers: the results of tests are used to determine what issues to run with, and what to leave to one side (Karpf 2016). To the extent that this internal listening goes on in practice, the group might be said to be fulfilling its potential to offer a process of authorisation and accountability (see also Chadwick 2013, chapter 9). This process is mediated via digital platforms, which allow segments of the subscribership community to form issue-based constituencies – by signing-on, meeting-up or various other online and off-line forms of participation related to advocacy on a specific policy issue. Whether groups deploy more sophisticated analytics, or simply utilize digital platforms to mediate priorities, the democratic legitimacy of such groups comes from the fact that campaigns originate from within the subscribership community, and they do not proceed in the absence of explicit endorsement (and often financing) from a substantial sub-section of the subscriber base.

## **WHEN DIGITAL DISRUPTION MEETS CLASSIC LOGICS OF LEGITIMATION: HOW NEW TECHNOLOGIES RE-SHAPE THE PRACTICES OF LEGACY GROUPS**

While the ‘digital natives’ discussed in the previous section are the most visible manifestation of the impact of new technologies, we also see that existing groups organized on solidarity and representative logics recognize the new opportunities offered by digital innovation. Our observation here is that old style bricks-and-mortar groups deploying representational or solidarity logics are experimenting with these new forms of legitimating policy work, for instance by rethinking their constituency and exploring new decision-making practices to set their policy agenda. We illustrate these arguments by reviewing the experiences of two groups that can be considered ideal-type examples of respectively a logic of representation and solidarity, namely an association of farmers and an animal welfare campaign group. By focusing our attention on two well-established groups that are strongly characterized by one of these two logics, and which have counterparts in many

established democracies, we aim to explore how the practices of traditional interest groups that have been established prior the digital age cope with these technological innovations.

*When digital opportunities meet the logic of representation*

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) is a national peak body for agriculture, composing of state farm bodies, and commodity based national organizations (see Connors 1996). Formed in 1979, it is the sole national peak in its area, and generally considered to be held in high regard among national policy elites relative to its size and resources (see Potard and Keogh 2014). While they are currently in a process of reorganization to address a range of diagnosed problems related to a more competitive lobbying environment and high transaction costs involved in maintaining its federal structure, what is highly salient is their explicit desire to respond to what they see as a new advocacy landscape, specifically the opportunities offered by digital technologies to maximize the engagement of the attentive public.

The Newgate Report (2014), one of a series of reports commissioned by the NFF in order to canvass options for its reorganization, provides a frank insight into the perceived value of utilizing digital platforms to engage with a constituency beyond farmers. The Report explains how under the proposed new NFF model 'The organisation is able to address the broader Australian community and engage the support of audiences beyond its immediate constituency. It then uses this broader community support as political power' (Newgate 2014, p. 8). To be clear, there is *no* suggestion that the NFF would interrupt its traditional definition of a member – a farm-business that pays annual voluntary fees to the organization. Moreover, these members will retain control over policy development and internal governance. The traditional relations with members inside thus remain undisturbed. What is proposed, however, is to *add* an attentive public for their cause (or

related causes that are consistent with their members' interests) outside their organization. They seek to grow a 'list' of citizens for whom they can rely on for political support – but they do not seek them as traditional members.

Yet, there are questions around the extent to which an attentive public can be found for the issues that *also* matter to constituencies with a clear economic or identity base – such as farmers. Put another way, why would anyone who is not a farmer identify with them sufficiently as to lend their names to a farmer-friendly attentive public? Such a question is highly salient given that farmers' interests are concentrated, and thus any policy wins are likely to disproportionately flow to them (Wilson 1973). The NFF's initial experiment in this regard was effectively creating a parallel structure with a campaigning identity. The 'Farmers for Free Trade' campaign – which sought to put pressure on the Australian opposition parties to ratify a 2015 China-Australia free trade agreement – involved setting up a bespoke website, requesting the general public and farmers to 'sign-up' and to donate. The outcome of this specific campaign was not as the NFF anticipated. Very few donations and sign-ups were received from *outside* the farming constituency. Moreover, most farmers failed to donate or sign up, as they were already members of the NFF.

It is not clear whether the specific issue of free-trade was the problem here, yet is likely that not all policy issues are equally suitable for an online approach. Vromen, for instance, notes that GetUp! has been particularly successful in campaigning on post-material concerns, yet also had difficulties mobilizing their constituency on more material issues, such as taxation (2016: 128). This hints at the natural limits for implementing some of these new approaches within groups that are based on the logic of representation. For these groups, whose core tasks involves the representation of very specific and identifiable constituency, it seems problematic to expand their constituency beyond this membership

base, as this risks to fundamentally change the constituency in whose name the group aims to speak.

*When digital opportunities meet the logic of solidarity*

In groups deploying a solidarity logic, such as most campaign groups, membership is typically passive, akin to supportership: it is implied that individuals sign up to a shared issue definition – ‘organisationally brokered’, if you will (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, p. 27). By contrast, the practice of ‘list building’ implies that individuals subscribe *in order* to then participate in personally-mediated and emerging issue definitions. It is ‘emerging’ in the sense that the framing of a given issue under which an individual mobilizes is not pre-given or even assumed to be shared by virtue of being a ‘member’ (Bimber *et al.* 2012).

The group Animals Australia (AA) provides a good illustration of this scenario. The group was formed in 1980 and describes itself on its website as ‘Australia's foremost national animal protection organisation, representing some 40 member groups and over 1.5 million individual supporters’. If we focus on how they involve individual citizens in their organizations, we notice that this group has a clear solidarity model, to which it is however incrementally adding new ways of participation and agenda setting practices enabled by digital technologies. *Animals Australia* has a set of campaign issues on its website – at last look it numbered 26 – on which it is currently active (or soliciting citizen support or actions). In short, Animals Australia has a policy agenda which is the sum of its active campaigns at any given time. This conclusion is in fact made explicitly on its website. In its FAQ section, in response to the question, ‘I have an idea for a campaign, can you help?’ it explains;



‘Animals Australia focuses its campaign efforts on the areas of greatest need -  
- this is why factory farming and live export are among our highest priorities,  
with more than half a billion animals suffering in these cruel industries every  
year. Our team of campaigners work hard to keep on top of all the issues  
affecting animals in Australia but, as a small charity *with limited time and  
resources, we simply cannot act on everything*. For this reason we rely on the growing  
community of animal advocates to speak out for animals and take a stand  
against cruelty.’ (italics added).

There is no pretence by this group to develop policies from among their supporters,  
nor to be directly responsive to them. Moreover, there is a clear desire to foster a narrow  
policy agenda whereby what it is *working* on is the sum total of what it is *interested* in. As is  
usual for such organizations, it relies on a small group of professional staff and a large  
number of remote small donors. While they state on their website that ‘Our important  
work on behalf of animals is reliant on the generosity of our members and donors’, this  
refers to the financial contribution , and not their input in decision-making processes.

Yet, at the same time, this group offers individuals the opportunity to join the  
‘Animals Australia Action Network’. This, according to the group ‘...*offers the opportunity to  
join an active group of dedicated, likeminded people, working together to make real change for animals.  
The network is coordinated by the Animals Australia team leader who sends out informative alerts to  
members, while also offering pro-active guidance and advice. We use this website (in conjunction with email)  
to centralize our communication, which enables us to respond immediately to campaign developments, and  
also helps to keep costs down*’. In addition, they also emphasize that ‘*As a member of the Action  
Network you can choose your own level of involvement. From letter writing to keep animal issues in the  
press and on the minds of decision makers, to assisting in public awareness initiatives, collecting petition*

*signatures, through to fundraising, campaigning and national days of action. There is something that everyone can do to help animals.'*

This brief example speaks to the broader issue around how a group defines its constituency, and what role different 'publics' play in setting its agenda. People who chose to become a member of the Animal's Australia community do not have to pay any membership fees, and in response receive email alerts asking for support, providing information on actions *and* offering coaching on methods of direct action they may take. An alternative option for individuals is to sign-up to 'e-updates', which again pushes content and updates on actions; they also aim to encourage people to start their own fundraising campaign. Again, no fee is paid. Finally, they also offer to option to 'become a member' (which they relate to pledging a monthly gift, which is in line with the typical 'solidarity' style of membership as financial contributions). These practices are very similar to those of digital natives such as MoveOn, Getup! and 26 Degrees, which put even more emphasis on 'offering personalized pathways to engagement' (Chadwick and Dennis 2017, p. 14), capitalizing on forms of participation that have become less structured and more ad hoc, issue-based and fluent. At this stage, the group has not, however, extended this involvement in respect of deciding the policy agenda of the organization: this remains set by the staff of the organization.

The approach of Animals Australia suggests it recognizes that there might be some signalling benefit in using the terminology of 'member' or 'supporter' (and 'community') on different occasions. Member implies a role in group affairs, while supporter implies a more anonymous form of endorsement of group positions. Nonetheless, this distinction seems to be blurring, which raises important questions regarding the internal democratic practices of the group. What is clear and unambiguous is that many groups (but particularly the mass member variety) now offer a range of varied relationships with supporters, rather

than the more traditional single formula membership option (similar observations have been made with respect to ‘supporter networks’ in political parties, e.g. Gauja 2015). This indicates that while they still prioritize interactions with their *committed* public, making use of new technologies they increasingly aim to reach out to a greater share of their *attentive* public. Similar practices can be observed for other campaign-style groups, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSCPA), Australian Conservation Foundation, WWF Australia and the Wilderness Society.

### *Synthesis: Implications for Groups as Democratic Agents*

The kind of synthetic experimentation our illustrative examples highlight, which relate to how groups define their constituency and involve them in decision-making, have important implications for their role as democratic agents and how these are evaluated by policy makers and public institutions. The advocacy claims of groups and their important function as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers – taken from a representational perspective – rest on the notion that they speak for a given constituency, such as farmers. They ‘proved’ this positively through their internal democratic apparatus and high membership density. By contrast, solidarity style groups make epistemic claims about what is in the interests of the constituency the advocate for, which rests by and large on the basis of input from experts and professional staff input. Having large numbers of supporters certainly helps underline the strength of feeling in the community, but the advocacy claim is one of privileged and expert access to the interests of the third party constituency. For instance, Animals Australia makes plain that it does not represent members, but speaks for animals who cannot speak for themselves.

The affordances of digital technology have allowed digital natives to firm up the notion of subscribership as a legitimate way to connect individuals to organisations. In the

case of advocacy organizations, it has disrupted the way in which groups have gone about structuring their relationship with individuals who affiliate with them. But more than that, it has also challenged ways of thinking about what constitutes a political constituency. Open, but mediated, communities are increasingly the focus of organisation building. Claims to legitimacy are made not simply in reference to expertise or to representative claims, but by reference to a ‘crowd’ as a ‘community’ or ‘movement’. The legitimacy of a group comes from the process of *creating* and thence advocating for ‘ephemeral’ and often issue-based constituencies. Such claims are harder to assess for policy makers and institutions, yet the evidence so far is that this has not hindered groups deploying them making substantial policy impacts (see discussion in Chadwick and Dennis 2017 for the UK).

In the Australian context, GetUp! explains “Today, there are countless ways to voice your opinion. But how do you make sure politicians are listening to you? GetUp focuses and amplifies your voice alongside a million others, so that you don't just get heard, you make a real difference’. It organizes around a range of issues – from indigenous rights, economic inequality, high education and the environment – that *could* be approached from a representation or solidarity logic. However, instead, it deploys a logic around pulling together a community of ‘like-minded’ people who share values. Similarly, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) – a leading environment group – could easily pursue the interests of nature in a solidarity-based logic. Yet, it chooses to develop a subscriber based community model. ‘The ACF community is an incredible force for nature. We are three hundred thousand people who speak out, show up and act for a future that's even more beautiful than today’. Again the logic here is that communities of individuals who share a broad set of values – in this case an environmentally sustainable future – are organized and thereafter decide what has to happen to make this a reality.

While representation is about advocating for discrete and relatively firmly established constituencies that have voice and presence, and solidarity is about advocating for discrete and relatively firmly established third-party constituencies that lack voice and presence, digital technology has allowed a different approach to flourish. Crucially, it suggests that constituencies (and their interests) do not exist objectively, but are formed *via* a process of organization. Essentially, this challenges the notion of the (non)accessibility of objective interests which sits at the heart of the distinction between representation and solidarity (O'Neil 2001; Pitkin 1967). Instead of individuals accepting that, when supporting animals or future generations, they will inevitably be contracting out advocacy to professional organisations, many groups nowadays work with constructs like 'community subscribership' and encourage the notion that individuals can directly stand up and be involved in representation of third party constituencies. This logic asserts that communities can legitimate advocacy in their own name on issues they care about.

Compared to representation and solidarity, organising subscriber-based issue communities means an issue is advocated principally because enough individuals clicked, signed up and donated to 'make it happen'. That is to say, in this logic individuals subscribe to a group and thereafter constituencies *emerge* out of a dynamic process of issue-identification, funding and support: a groups' subscriber base – a manifestation of its 'attentive public' – acts as the crowd from which issue-priorities – and issue-based constituencies – are sourced. It is this very *process* of forming communities from within the 'list' that authorizes leaders, as it allows those affiliated to opt-in to specific campaigns, to join communities, and to create the momentum (and also importantly the resources) for advocacy to occur. It is akin to crowdsourcing in the sense that the interests being advocated for are, from a subscriber perspective, made 'by us and for us' (Brabham 2013, p. 90). But it is also the immediacy of digital technology – particularly email and social

media – that enables subscribers to signal their approval (or not) for specific issue agendas that lends legitimacy.

## CONCLUSION

Both scholars and architects of formal political institutions increasingly endorse groups as agents of democratization. However, students of interest groups tend to be pessimistic as to whether they can live up to this promise. The reason, we suggested, is that groups do not meet the standards of behaviour that are required by a representational logic of legitimation. Halpin (2006), in this journal, has contested a claim that groups ought to be only be measured against a representational logic of democratic legitimation, and pointed to an additional logic of solidarity. In building on this work, we have pointed to how digital technologies have the potential to disrupt *both* these existing practices, specifically focusing on how groups determine their constituency and involve them in organizational decision-making.

These new technologies have enabled a generation of ‘digital natives’ to emerge and take on novel approaches to organising interests. While these style of groups are well known and high profile, there are relatively few of them amidst large (and growing) advocacy populations. Thus, the possible impact of this disruption is more evident in the way existing groups (that are not ‘digital natives’) are organising advocacy. Digital technology may for instance allow *existing* groups to develop hitherto unimaginable *new* practices. The impact of web-based communications technologies has had an impact on the way these groups *decide* to design relationships with supporters. It is reshaping the supply-side of group membership. As observed by Chadwick ‘...traditional, even staid, groups are changing their internal organization and building loose networks in previously untapped reservoirs of citizen support’ (2007, p. 291). Many groups now utilize their web

portals to offer the chance for individuals to ‘join’ as members for a fee, but *also* offer the chance for individuals to sign-up for no-fee and receive updates on group actions, volunteer, locate like-minded people or even contribute to group positions (Bimber *et al.* 2012, p. 7). Alongside branch-based members, groups are enrolling online members who might never meet one another. And, in some cases, this extends to involving these online subscribers to assist in setting group policy agendas. It is the latter development that is novel, and that flows directly from technological advancements.

Returning to the question of groups as democratic agents, what does digital disruption mean for the democratic credentials of groups? According to Bimber *et al.* (2009, p. 79) the typical interest group – think here of the standard business, professional or trade union organisation plying their trade with a broadly representational logic – is well adapted to an environment where there are ‘high costs of information and communication, few avenues of horizontal interaction among citizens who are not proximate to one another, and targets for organizing that involve large, slow moving, policy institutions’. Where such conditions do not hold, they suggest that a different group approach will make more sense, chief among them the type of digital natives who have fully embraced opportunities offered by digital technology to maximize their attentive public and utilize new digital forms of member involvement. The analysis we presented above suggests that the groups deploying representative or solidarity logics are starting to question their approaches – seeing their policy world changing in ways that Bimber suggests leave them increasingly poorly adapted – and are actively experimenting with these new approaches. However, we do identify key differences. Those groups working with a solidarity logic are better able to take advantage of technological disruption. Specifically, they can better engage with their full attentive public (through adoption of a subscribership approach), even involving them in shaping policy agendas. While groups operating in a representative logic also benefit from potentially cheaper means of communicating with members, the

subscriber approach creates substantial problems in respect of who their members really are.

What does this mean for the study of public administration? This study was in part motivated by the increased emphasis placed by public institutions on using their contact with interest groups as a means to address apparent democratic deficits. In short, the democratic legitimacy of groups should ‘rub off’ on the legitimacy of governing institutions. Against this backdrop, we have set out to illustrate that group legitimacy is itself a multi-faceted phenomenon. Groups, so we argue, legitimate themselves on different logics, which in turn necessitate different approaches to organising their policy agendas and engaging with members or supporters. More than that, we go on to show that the advent of digital technologies has fostered substantial experimentation with agenda setting and member engagement, which again renders the legitimating effects of groups up for debate.

The implications for policy makers are mixed. On the one hand, we echo Karpf’s concerns that the wholesale adoption of approaches to legitimation pioneered by ‘digital’ natives would likely bring with it a net loss in the capacity of the breadth and quality of advocacy they receive (2012). For while digital natives *can* effectively legitimate advocacy, it tends not to generate important organizational by-products that are typical of the logics based on representation and solidarity. For instance, representational logics demand the capacity to engage directly with members, often face to face, which aids their capacity to generate societal legitimacy, to act as a channel for constituency demands and function as intermediaries between society and policymaking. The literature on campaign groups, for example, proposed that their competitive advantage rested on a capacity to generate large resources bases from which to fund expert-based lobby strategies: the presumption here



being that such groups generate substantial policy expertise (Jordan and Maloney 1997; Jordan and Halpin 2004).

Yet, the technology such approaches pioneered by ‘digital natives’ adopt renders groups able to respond to shifting policy agendas more rapidly, and to bridge the views of members and the broader public: two things which might make the role of policy makers easier, provided they acknowledge the diversity and value of these different legitimization logics. From a normative perspective, making public policy is likely to benefit from a policy community composed of a mix of groups deploying a range of logics, and offering citizens different ways to become politically engaged. That we can see ‘digital natives’ seeking to increase their societal legitimacy by building alliances with ‘legacy’ groups – for instance, GetUp! in Australia is working regularly with the Australian Council of Social Services (the peak body for the social services sector), the Australia Institute (a progressive think tank) and the union movement – might mean that these coalitions, composed of groups who establish their legitimacy in different ways, can make unique and versatile contributions to policy processes. Such trends of course require future empirical investigation. Yet, they signal important implications for the ongoing engagement of public institutions with an increasingly diverse organized civil society.

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